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ABSTRACT

A college level course for marginal composition students draws its format from the Personalized System of Instruction (PSI) model, in which the teacher prepares written course and assignment information in advance of the course and is then free to provide tutorial assistance to students during class periods throughout the semester. The PSI model calls for self-paced instruction and student mastery of designated skills; grading is based on how students complete a predetermined number of assignments. The course bases its teaching of the composition process on the Roger Garrison/Donald Murray model. Students choose their own writing topics, designate an audience and a specific purpose, and choose an appropriate form. They concentrate on four areas designated as evaluation criteria--specificity, organization, expression, and mechanics--which are stressed in that order. Proofreading is integrated with writing, with a few major errors emphasized. A writing laboratory or a comparable component within the classroom enables students to master proofreading skills according to individual needs. (GW)

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# Writing and Proofreading[1]: An Alternative Program for Basic Composition Courses

by Betty McFarland

At the 1975 SCETC session on the Writing Laboratory, I concluded three vastly different presentations by observing that those of us who teach marginal composition students must recognize preferred teaching modes as well as preferred learning patterns. No single approach is the approach for every teacher, just as no single assignment is the right one for every student. At that time I had found my mode of instruction for my own writing laboratory; that is, I had learned through hundreds of students (since 1964 when I first set up a non-credit service lab at Appalachian) that an open lab demands an eclectic, flexible approach and that the same approach, not even the same material, can be used with all students. What I had not found was a preferred teaching mode for my basic composition classes. That I have found during the last two years as I have integrated two teaching models. At the same time, I have recognized that the Writing Laboratory is an invaluable support service for the composition class, especially in the area of proofreading.

One model I have drawn from is the PSI model (Personalized System of Instruction),[2] which provides the format for assignments and the course, the external management features. (1) The PSI model relies primarily on the written word to communicate with students, all material prepared in advance of the course. In my Writing unit are a statement of course requirements, criteria for evaluation, a check sheet for assignments, suggestions for writing a first draft and for revising, instructions and guidelines for each assignment. The first day of class students receive or are instructed as to the location of all material, including individual folders, accessible to both student and teacher, for the filing of all writing and of a record of all work completed. (2) I am then completely free to consult with students the entire semester, assisted, when available, by student tutors. (3) Another PSI feature is self-pacing, a strong motivator. A student may exit from the course any time after midterm upon satisfactory completion of all designated assignments. For every student who exits early, twice as much help is available to the student who does not.

The PSI model also calls for (4) unit mastery—at the A level—before continuing. For the majority of students such writing is, of course, not a realistic goal, but proficiency at the C level is.[3] For each assignment, the student writes, revises, writes, proofreads until the assignment is satisfactory in all four areas designated as criteria for evaluation: specificity, organization, expression, mechanics. Satisfactory denotes C level writing or better. In freshman English, where I am compelled to give letter grades, I assign a grade of A, B, C, or F to a pre-determined number of themes and average these for the course grade. Usually these are one theme of the student's choice and the last two written, one of which the student completes in class with no tutorial assistance. Prerequisite to a course grade of C is the satisfactory completion of all assignments, including work in the Writing Laboratory on proofreading skills if necessary. In a one-hour review course for juniors, the course grade is simply Satisfactory or Unsatisfactory, with discreet use of Incomplete for a student who has worked diligently, improved significantly, but needs more time to attain proficiency. With modification of the mastery concept, the PSI model is adaptable to writing courses.

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The most important thing, though, about a composition course is not the organization of it, but the actual writing. The proper focus is the composing process itself. The model that governs this internal feature of my courses is the one known at SCETC as the Garrison approach[4] and known by my colleagues at ASU as the Murray approach.[5] While the PSI model defines the teacher's role as manager and consultant, the Garrison/Murray model defines the role as catalyst and tutor/editor.

Prior to 1976 I relied heavily on cluttered texts, models, rhetorical forms, product evaluation--traditional and deductive approaches. To assure constant prewriting, writing, revising and to assure student accountability for writing, I have abandoned all of these. Currently my six core assignments designate only the general purpose of the writing, not the topic or the form. Students must choose a topic, designate an audience and a specific purpose, and use an appropriate form. Most freshmen find the idea of writing for an audience other than an English teacher new; they also dislike the responsibility of choosing every topic, preferring structure. The students mature, though, as they observe and read, probe and think, arrive at well-informed decisions and attitudes and then write. Juniors usually respond well, especially when they find out that they can write on topics assigned for reading in their major courses. The writing course may serve as an adjunct to these courses, the major professors supplying writing assignments for their students. For example, the Department of Physical Education has provided a list of purposes for which P. E. majors should be able to write: letters to players, parents, coaches; newspaper articles about special events, game results; statements of course aims and objectives, training rules; paragraphs describing ethical practices, mechanics of movement, creative movement. These are consistent with at least two of the purposes I designate, writing to report information and to describe a process.

From the Garrison/Murray model I have also derived a priority system for writing and for proofreading. My editorial checklist has become my course objectives: (1) specificity--adequate, accurate details, absence of vulnerable generalizations; (2) organization--thesis and coherent, logical arrangement; (3) expression-- fluency, variety; (4) mechanical correctness--absence of major usage errors. The first objective, specificity, has top priority, and during the first short conference with a student I read only for adequate details and absence of vulnerable generalizations.[6] The first "writing" is a prewriting, a list of details. The student continues according to whether she has met the first criterion--seeking more information, more details, if necessary, continuing with a second writing for organization if the details are accurate and adequate according to the purpose of the paper--and proceeds with writing and rewriting through priority #4, proofreading.

Every class after the first is a tutorial session where I evaluate each student's paper for only one criterion at a time, in the order listed above as objectives. The check sheet, a duplicate copy kept in the student's folder, enables me to keep up with everyone.

After meeting priority #1 for the first multi-paragraph paper and after writing a draft for organization, students who do not have a clear thesis

and a sense of direction for the paper--main ideas--review organization.[7] For some students the course objective "expression" becomes priority #1, for fluency is lacking. These students stop work on the regular assignments and spend whatever time necessary on free writing assignments.[8] When the student's writing shows significant improvement in fluency, she continues with the regular assignments. The "variety" aspect of expression does remain priority #3, for usually the better a student knows and understands a topic, the more sophisticated the sentences. Some, though, do settle into monotonous, ineffective patterns. A student accustomed to making a lot of mechanical errors may deliberately write primer sentences in an effort to avoid errors and red marks.[9] Practice with sentence structure gives such a student needed confidence in expression before she has to deal with proofreading.

A set of priorities again governs the final proofreading of a paper. Five errors[10] I consider major, and after a student has proofread her own paper, I check for these: fragments, run-on sentences, subject-verb disagreement, pronoun-antecedent disagreement, incorrect verb forms. In basic writing courses I do very little with other errors (except spelling); in regular courses I call attention to other problems according to the writing level of the student, increasing expectations for above-average writers. I have found that when a student has something to say and understands the significance and relationship of the facts, when sentences are fluent and varied, diction precise, she often does not need to review proofreading skills; usage errors decrease as content, organization, and expression improve. A proofreading assignment I make only after an error recurs on a theme; the first time I explain the error briefly to the student, have her correct it in my presence, make a notation on her check sheet, and remind her to proofread the next paper carefully for the error. If the error recurs, I refer the student to the Writing Laboratory for assistance and for a focused review of the error.

A Writing Laboratory is an ideal place for priority #4, proofreading. Certainly a lab can provide assistance other than proofreading; a comprehensive lab has tutoring and instructional material available for every course objective in freshman English.[11] At ASU the majority of English professors, however, refer students for help with proofreading skills; many of them teach writing via tutorials, emphasizing the process of writing. Because of lack of time and the variety and irregularity of student errors, proofreading continues to be the major area where the classroom teacher needs support from lab. Advantages of a lab are obvious: a central location to house instructional materials and availability of these materials to all faculty, making it unnecessary for each to re-invent the wheel. Another advantage is the PSI features: (1) all material is written/assembled in advance and indexed according to error, (2) proctoring or tutorial assistance is available, (3) instruction is self-paced and individualized based on themes written in regular courses, (4) for usage review, mastery is required (score of 90% on post-tests) and for writing, proficiency at the C level is the goal. Although a lab is desirable, for basic composition courses and for teachers who have limited priorities for proofreading, all of the features of a Writing Lab can be contained in a regular classroom.

Whether proofreading review is in the lab or the classroom, I "integrate"

writing and proofreading by placing them back to back. In an effort not to isolate usage review, I use the theme containing the error, not a grammar test, to pinpoint the review needed. For example, an instance of subject-verb disagreement in a sentence with a compound subject requires the student to review only agreement in troublesome sentence patterns, not every aspect of agreement. A shift in number requires a review of number only, not number and person. After each review, the student corrects the error(s) in the writing--the paragraph or essay where the error occurred prior to the usage assignment; she then takes a post-test, which includes proofreading 5-10 sentences and/or a paragraph and completing another writing task, a short paragraph. Upon satisfactory completion of the assignment, the student continues with the next writing assignment in the basic course.

This method of integrating writing and proofreading is a valid one, as my 1973 research project with individualized instruction indicates.[12] Student improvement in the area of mechanical correctness was significant at the .001 level ($p < .001$). The study further shows that the interrelated growth in confidence and skill mastery through an individualized/tutorial approach does effect a change in the marginal student's performance in written communication.

Recent publicity has reminded us that the public does hold English teachers accountable for the quality of writing in America. We must remember, though, that our task in a writing course is to make each student accountable for her own writing. I believe the key to student accountability in writing is for the student to write--a lot--and for the teacher to assist in the process through individualized/tutorial instruction. My own program, Writing and Proofreading, is one way to organize a course for a tutorial. Giving proofreading fourth priority is not slighting the so-called basics but is keeping a proper perspective between the basics in the composing process itself and the basics of mechanics. Using one booklet for Writing and five for Proofreading is not a contradiction but a statement that a student needs the teacher most for the writing process and perhaps least for proofreading skills. In the final analysis, the student herself is accountable for all aspects of her own writing.

Writing, then, according to the scheme presented here, is content first, written for a specific audience and a specific purpose; content ordered second; ordered content expressed with fluency and variety third; and ordered content, expressed with fluency and variety, proofread last. The Garrison/Murray model emphasizes a few major errors over many minor ones, content over form, tutoring/editing over lecturing/grading, process over product. The PSI model makes possible the implementation of this approach with a class of average size; while not all students attain mastery of the writing process--A level writing, they do attain a level of proficiency competitive in regular classes. A Writing Laboratory or a comparable component within the classroom enables each student to master proofreading skills according to individual needs. These three approaches used in combination do enable students to write--better.

## Notes

1
B. McFarland, Writing and Proofreading: Priority #4, Limited Printing, 1977. A modularized program: a writing unit, 5 booklets on 5 major usage errors, and a test booklet; includes a materials index of 13 resources for review of 16 usage errors.

2
B. McFarland, "An Individualized Course in Elementary Composition for the Marginal Student," Personalized Instruction in Higher Education: Proceedings of the Second National Conference, Ben A. Green, Jr., ed., 1976, 45-48.

3
See PSI article for further comments on C as the appropriate level of "mastery" for marginal composition students.

4
Roger Garrison, Director of Institute on How to Teach Writing--Better, Westbrook College, Portland, Maine. See his article "One-to-One: Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition," Implementing Innovative Instruction: New Directions for Community Colleges, Vol. II, No. 1, Spring, 1974.

5
Donald Murray, Chairperson, Department of English, University of New Hampshire and Consultant on Teaching Writing as Process. See his Book A Writer Teaches Writing: A Practical Method of Teaching Composition.

6
Recommended resource for generalizations: J. N. Hook, "Gaining Respect for Your Ideas," Units 1-5, Competence in English: A Fresh Look at the Basics, Second Edition, pp. 1-60.

7
Recommended resources for review of organization: Sheridan Baker, The Practical Stylist, Fourth Edition (on Thesis, Structure, Paragraphs, pp. 1-27); Mary Lou Conlin, Theme Module from Concepts of Communication: Writing (summary of structure of theme, pp. 3, 40-41); Joseph Gallo and Henry Rink, Shaping College Writing: Paragraph and Essay (on "The Form of the Essay," pp. 125-137); Kathleen Sullivan, Paragraph Practice, Third Edition (on "Writing the Short Composition," pp. 97-115).

8
Recommended resource: Ken Macrorie, Writing to be Read and Telling Writing.

9
For recommended resources for variety see Materials Index cited in note #1, especially William Strong's Sentence Combining: A Composing Book and Frank O'Hare's Sentence Combining.

10
The Proofreading modules of the Writing and Proofreading program.

11 See the following articles for quidelines for setting up a Writing Laboratory: B. McFarland, "The Non-Credit Writing Laboratory," Teaching English in the Two-Year College, Spring, 1975, 153-54 and "Counterstatement," TETYC, Winter, 1976, 99-100.

12 See PSI article (note #2) for validation of the method and of the usage modules.